

The WebPolis Consortium: E-Government in Practice

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WebPolis, a third generation of online communication technology, makes use of a networked virtual work environment for inter- and intra-city collaboration. Through WebPolis residents, community leaders, agency officials, and local elected officials can share applications, databases, and participate in online conferences.

In 2002, TOP awarded a \$241,185 matching grant to Eastern Michigan University to develop a working prototype for online community planning and decision making. The goals of WebPolis are threefold: (1) to provide local government with intelligent decision-making tools and greater information resources; (2) to encourage greater public input into local decision making; and (3) to share information sources between and among communities.

WebPolis Consortium members include the Eastern Michigan Institute for Geospatial Research and Education, Albion College, the largest statewide organization representing professional and lay planners in the country (the Michigan Society of Planning), one county government (Washtenaw County, Michigan), one regional organization (Forks Initiative of the greater Albion Community), and two local communities (the Cities of Albion and Ypsilanti, Michigan). Local officials in these agencies and communities have identified issues of greatest priority for local governments to demonstrate the effectiveness of the project model.

The WebPolis Consortium website links a series of applications with a common user interface. The applications include online computer discussion conferences; over 100 local government information web pages; financial spreadsheets and templates; spatial analysis and mapping applications, including geographic information systems (GIS); and the WebPolis "Decision Action Process" to aid in local government decision-making.

The WebPolis Interactive Town Caucus website enables the user to take a tour of the "Downtown Revitalization" project and take part in an interactive revitalization simulation. Caucus conference participants can enter graphics, HTML code, links to files, audio and video information, as well as text. The Caucus host computer keeps a complete record of everything that takes place in the conference and a personal record of what you have seen, what's new, and

your interests. This site also provides links to case studies of projects and additional planning resources.

An example of what participants on the WebPolis site are invited to address includes questions about revitalization. For instance:

Should downtown businesses compete directly against major discounters and chain stores, such as Wal-Mart and The Gap, in an attempt to recapture their retail dominance? Should they evolve into new kinds of retail centers, with businesses that don't compete directly with the new chain stores, but are complementary to them? Should downtowns abandon their traditional retail role entirely and become service centers, relying increasingly on office and financial functions for their viability? Or are downtowns now obsolete, and should they be allowed to die a natural death, as have other elements of our 19th and early 20th century cities? The larger question underlying all these is – **What is the role of downtowns in the coming century?**



The WebPolis project has two demonstration project sites. The Ypsilanti, Michigan project is closely tied with Washtenaw County's "E-Democracy" project to involve the public in community decision making related to the city's Parks and Recreation Plan. In Albion, Michigan, project participants are developing an economic development model for the Albion Economic Development Commission.

In future years, Consortium membership is expected to expand to a self-sustaining level. Dissemination of the project will be widespread through presentations, publications, and website links.